

Hungary

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Participants

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Led by Ben Kokay



European Bee-eater

Day 1: This holiday really represented the triumph of birds and birders over the malign forces of nature! 12 hours before our flight from Gatwick to Budapest was due to depart Gatwick Airport was closed due to volcanic ash. Eight hours later it was reopened but for take-off only – not landing. Our flight was not due to leave until 11.00 and therefore depended on an arriving aircraft to be able to operate. But EasyJet, in their wisdom, decided that they would use one of the three aircraft they had at Gatwick to fly to Budapest, so miraculously we arrived at Budapest only 30 minutes behind schedule. Meanwhile, thanks to Birdfinders “yellow luggage label policy” the three of us had met up at Gatwick, so easily made contact with our leader Ben and driver Attila. Then we discovered that Hungary, along with Poland and Slovakia, was under water following the worst spring storms since 1988! All major rivers had burst their banks at various points, so several roads were closed and a few changes had to be made to the detail of the programme. Nevertheless we set off in our minibus for the two and a half hour drive to the Buck Hills northeast of Budapest. En route we stopped at a filling station for what we assumed was a comfort break. In fact it was an Eastern Imperial Eagle break, as we watched one of these majestic birds perched on a pylon about 400 metres away. We also happened upon a Crested Lark feeding in the car park! On arrival at our hotel in Nova we went for a short walk around the village and within minutes had our attention divided between a confiding Grey-headed Woodpecker and a noisy Eurasian Wryneck, with both Common and Black Redstarts and Hawfinch as a sideshow. We then enjoyed a wonderful non-slimmers’ dinner, where the main difficulty was knowing how many more courses were to come!

Day 2: Just as well we had a pre-breakfast walk; otherwise we would have been unable to do justice to the wonderful buffet on offer! The weather was suspect, but it wasn’t actually raining as we set out. Almost immediately it became apparent that in this largely agricultural country, many farmland birds which have become scarce or even extinct in the UK over the past 20 years are still very much in evidence in Hungary, thus Common Cuckoo, Tree Sparrow, Corn Bunting, European Turtle-dove, Yellow Wagtail and especially that most handsome pirate, Red-backed Shrike, became everyday commonplace sightings. More unexpected, on our way to the Bukk National Park was a River Warbler (usually a skulking bird) perched on top of a bush in full song, giving excellent views to us all. Possibly because one of the tracks we planned to take was impassable, when we arrived at the National Park we had to work pretty hard to find three of our target birds, Barred Warbler, Wood Warbler and Rock Bunting, though all three finally gave us good views, and our fourth target – Collared Flycatcher, was much in evidence. After a picnic lunch we also had to work hard to find a White-backed Woodpecker, but finally Ben found a fledgling low on the trunk of a tree adjacent to the nest hole. Later in the afternoon, a scheduled stop on the way back to Nosvaj was prolonged by a battery problem in the minibus. Just as well, for the delay gave us excellent views of our first Lesser Spotted Eagle.

Day 3: Only one member of the group got up early enough for the pre-breakfast walk, but was rewarded by the discovery of a Hawfinch nest within a few metres of the hotel, plus excellent views of Middle-spotted Woodpecker in a nearby park. However, the more indolent members of the party were not punished for staying in bed until 7.30, as the whole group made contact with both nest and woodpeckers after breakfast and before departure for our next destination, the Zemplen Hills, further northeast, close to the Slovakian border. On the way we stopped in a high-class residential area for Syrian Woodpecker, which eluded us, but we did add Icterine Warbler and Spotted Flycatcher to our list and also had more sightings of Collared Flycatcher. We stopped for a picnic near the Bodrog River, where we had good sightings of White Stork and Western Marsh-harrier – both destined to be frequently seen during the rest of the trip plus Eurasian Hobby and Eurasian Reed Bunting, both of which were to be found to be much scarcer for our group. After lunch we went for a walk, where we added Black Stork and Yellowhammer to our list, plus another River Warbler and, after prolonged listening, we had a brief view of a Corn Crake in flight. While waiting for this bird to appear, Brian noticed a Black Kite floating lazily over our heads – our only sighting of this raptor. In late afternoon we arrived in the Zemplen Hills where we had much better views of White-backed Woodpecker at its nest, and also our first (but far from last) European Honey-buzzard, before checking in to our recently-opened, all wooden hotel which turned out to be principally an accommodation venue for hunters. We birders kept our distance for fear of contamination!

Day 4: Our pre-breakfast walk gave us the repeated and tantalising experience of listening to the bubbling song of Eurasian Golden Oriole, but alas the birds would not show. We had to rest content with good views of Hawfinch, Lesser Whitethroat and innumerable Blackcaps. After breakfast, we made contact with the local wildlife ranger, who took us on a fairly tough trek (due to the weather) through dense woodland to a clearing where there had been nesting Ural Owl. Unfortunately it appeared that the young had recently fledged, for there was no sign of either parents or owlets, though Ben did briefly see a Black Woodpecker and Max found another White-backed Woodpecker. Undaunted, the ranger took us in the rain to a quarry where Eurasian Eagle-owl were known to be present. But the bird obviously didn't appreciate the rain for it also failed to appear. After a damp picnic we set off to a raptor hotspot, and here our luck changed. Anita spotted a ringtail harrier, which had the plumage characteristics of Montagu's but the bulk of Pallid. All attempts by the expert Ben to reach a conclusive identification failed, and the bird was finally described as "harrier sp." – shame! Less problematical to identify were our second Eastern Imperial Eagle, Lesser Spotted Eagle and our nth European Honey-buzzard. Raptor hotspot indeed, but not bad for other species too, for this stop also provided us with a Black Woodpecker (seen by all of us this time), a Green Woodpecker and our first European Bee-eater.

Day 5: A brief early morning foray finally produced our first visible Eurasian Golden Oriole. After breakfast we left the hotel for our journey to the Hortobagy National Park. En route we stopped in a promising looking valley, where we were rewarded by seeing our only Short-toed Snake-eagle, plus Whinchat, yet another Barred Warbler and, bizarrely, a Sky Lark in full song, not in flight but perched on top of a bush! Our next stop, just to the west of Hortobagy was at Lake Tisza, where we encountered our first water birds of the holiday. But not before we had admired a European Roller perched on nearby telegraph wires. The water birds were spectacular, and within minutes we had admired two Ferruginous Ducks at close range, and also Black-crowned Night-heron, Squacco Heron, Purple Heron and the first of scores of Great Egrets. A Great Reed-warbler also gave us excellent view whilst singing its heart out. Over lunch we tried and again failed to locate Syrian Woodpecker – where is this bird? But as compensation, once inside the Hortobagy, we were taken to a wonderful colony of breeding Red-footed Falcons. One nest box provided us with the sight of a domestic drama, as two males tried to gain access to the same nest box where a female was in fierce residential control. She was in no doubt which male she preferred as she pushed one strenuously out of the nest box with her wings and shortly afterwards welcomed the other with a show of affection. Next we were taken to an inoffensive looking sandbank, which turned out to be the nesting site for around 30 European Bee-eaters and about twice that number of Sand Martins. We stayed at least half an hour absorbed by the constant comings and goings of these birds and admiring the way they had, no doubt amicably, divided up the nest holes in the sandbank – "Sand Martins to the left, European Bee-eaters to the right if you please." A 16:00 rendezvous with the wildlife ranger led to the most strenuous, but ultimately most rewarding excursion of the whole trip. Because of

the floods, what should have been a 2 km ride in a 4 wheel drive jeep followed by a 600 metre walk through tall grassy reeds, turned into a welly clad 2 km walk along an exceedingly muddy track followed by a 600 metre wade through 25 cm deep water to a clearing. Within 30 seconds of our arrival a male Aquatic Warbler popped up on the top of a reed stem about 30 metres in front of us, and proceeded to give us a 20 minute treat involving prolonged song, acrobatics as it gripped two reed stems simultaneously – one with each leg, followed by several spectacular display flights. So absorbing was this that we took virtually no notice of a booming male Great Bittern nearby! We did not, however, ignore the presence of our first Bluethroat of the trip along the muddy track, nor the flight antics of all three species of marsh tern (Black, White-winged and Whiskered) while we were watching the Aquatic Warbler. After this, we made our way to our hotel on the banks of the Tisza River at Tiszacsege, only to find that the hotel car park was completely under water, whilst the local ferry service across the river had had to be suspended and was likely to be out of action for several weeks. Even though there was no rain during our last four days, the water level in the car park on our departure was higher than it had been on our arrival.

Day 6: Our pre-breakfast walk was in search of woodpeckers. Syrian still evaded us but we did see Black, plus Common Kingfisher and Pygmy Cormorant. Most of this day was, however, devoted to a visit to the famous Hortobagy fishponds. The weather had become warm and sunny and the walk along the track between the fishponds was enjoyable in its own right, but made more so by the profusion of different bird species, most of which we had not encountered before on this trip. Thus, in quick succession, we saw Marsh Warbler, Eurasian Golden Oriole, Red-necked Grebe, Little Bittern, Caspian Gull, Common Pochard, Eurasian Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis, Little Egret, European Penduline-tit and Bearded Tit to our list, and also enjoyed better views than we had previously had of Bluethroat and Ferruginous Duck. After our picnic lunch a Savi's Warbler, which had tantalised us repeatedly with its reeling, finally gave up its secrets and provided us with good views. Feeling slightly weary after a warm and fairly energetic day, we stopped on our way back to the hotel for another European Roller, an unmistakable (this time) ringtail Montagu's Harrier and a female Saker Falcon, perched close to its nest.

Day 7: At last! A Syrian Woodpecker showing really well within a few metres of the hotel and ticked before breakfast. After breakfast we headed for the steppe lands of the Hortobagy. En route we stopped for a walk alongside a canal. This gave us excellent views of a Eurasian Hoopoe, which was keeping itself 100 metres ahead of us on the same track. We also saw another Little Bittern and added Black-tailed Godwit, Black-winged Stilt and Northern Shoveler to our list. On to the steppes, where fortunately there are a number of elevated observation platforms, without which spotting distant birds would have been virtually impossible. From these we had good views of Long-legged Buzzard and even better views of a pair of close by Lesser Grey Shrikes. The male was enthusiastically bowing, tail bobbing and sidling up to the female, who was singularly unimpressed by these antics and took no notice whatsoever! Later we saw another Lesser Spotted Eagle and a Red-footed Falcon, but we had to wait until the afternoon before seeing our primary target – a sub-adult Montagu's Harrier. Later we noticed a small group of Common Cranes in the distance, but then became aware of three of these birds much closer, behaving rather strangely, it was then that we noticed that the cranes were being stalked by a hungry Red Fox. The fox didn't stand a chance! On the way back to the hotel we stopped at a wetland site, where unfortunately the grass had grown too high to be attractive to many birds. We did, however, find our only Tawny Pipit (indeed our only pipit of any species) here and also our only owls – a pair of Little Owl perched at opposite ends of the roof of a farm building. Finally we visited a mini fishpond system. There were hosts of birds, but principally the mixture as before, but with an important plus – our first and only Moustached Warbler. We returned to the hotel for the checklist and discovered that the group had managed exactly 100 birds during the day.

Day 8: Sadly this was the day we had to get ourselves back to Budapest for the flight home. This involved a minibus journey of nearly three hours, but Ben had a final trick up his sleeve. He diverted to a small National Park a few miles south of Budapest, which he described as his "local patch" and which he knew like the back of his hand. The result was that within five minutes of arriving at our first stopping point – an unexciting looking stretch of straight minor road, he had found us a small group of male Great Bustards on one side of the road and a flock of spectacular Collared Pratincoles on the other! From there

we went to a nearby gravel pit, where Eurasian Thick-knee had previously bred on a small island. Sadly they were absent that day, but we did add Mediterranean Gull to our list before reluctantly heading in the direction of Budapest airport for the flight home.

As I said at the outset, this was a triumph of birds and birders over adverse conditions. Given the floods affecting much of our habitat, a species total of 141 (plus “harrier sp”!) for the trip was pretty good and reflects great credit on the expertise and dedication of Ben, our leader.

Brian Roberts-Wray